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Hello, my name is Katie Page Sander. I am an adoptive parent and have been a social worker working in the child welfare system in Michigan in various capacities for the past 18 years. The majority of my career has been spent as an employee of a private child placing agency. Despite the heartbreak, the stress, the low pay and the thanklessness of being in the trenches with the children and families touched by foster care, I stay because I haven't lost my belief that we as a community (social workers, foster and adoptive parents, faith communities, mentors, foster alumni and advocates) can improve a system that still fails so many. We owe our children our best efforts to help them not only to survive, but to thrive.

Most importantly, the rights of the children whose lives are at stake, who we are morally and legally obligated to care for as a community, are strangely absent from the discussion of this bill. All adoption cases in Michigan are assigned to private agencies. Children do not choose whether their case will be supervised by an agency which has supported the right to deny certain families based on their "sincerely held religious beliefs." Let me introduce you to Michael, age 17 (show photo from MARE). He is one of the over 272 children with no identified adoptive family in Michigan today. He's been waiting for a forever family since May 2007 -- since he was 10 years old. Imagine, hypothetically, that Michael's case is assigned to one of these agencies and that a single father inquires about adopting him, or a Jewish couple, or a parent with a history of divorce ... or a same sex couple. Without Michael's knowledge or input, none of these families are considered for him. In this scenario, Michael would never know that someone wanted him, and would age out of the foster care system without a family. The "religious freedoms" of his social worker and agency will have been preserved by their unilateral declaration that no family at all is preferable to any of the possible non-Christian or non-traditional families that could have made Michael their son.

When one works in the field of child welfare, there are some children, some faces and stories, which affect us so deeply that they stick with us for a lifetime. For me, it is "Jay", who spent 13 years in foster care before "aging out". I was the one to transport him around from foster home to foster home, to shelters, to residential facilities, all the while trying to instill hope by showing him that I was working hard to find a permanent family where he could stay put. But I never did. No one ever stepped up to be his forever family. I saw him in a newspaper article several years later. He was being interviewed about his experiences in foster care, his recent homelessness and his efforts to regain custody of his own infant son, placed in foster care. His cries of "please don't leave me here!" as I left him in a shelter for the first time at age 15 are indelibly imprinted in my brain. I failed him. We all failed him. No one stepped up. Not a Christian family, not a Jewish family, not a same sex couple.

This bill protects NO child from harm, but only increases the likelihood that J's story repeats itself again and again and again. The right of a child to a family supercedes any right for a private agency to collect taxpayer money to provide religious based services to children who have no freedom to choose who serves them.

With over 13,000 children in foster care in Michigan today and about 3,000 children available for adoption – 272 of whom have no identified adoptive family, it is common knowledge that there is a constant shortage of safe, appropriate foster and adoptive homes to meet the needs of our state's most vulnerable population. Michigan cannot in good conscience enact HB 4188, 4189 and 4190 which state "when it is necessary for a child in this state to be placed with an adoptive or foster family, placing this child in a safe, loving and supportive home is a paramount goal of this state", while simultaneously condoning the rejection of whole categories of prospective families to meet this paramount goal.

Michigan's Foster Care Navigator Program tracks the demographics of families inquiring about becoming licensed foster families. "Non-traditional" families (including single parents, families with a history of divorce and same sex couples) made up 52 percent of prospective foster family inquiries in Michigan in FY 2013-2014. When a family makes the leap to make their first call to an agency to inquire about being licensed for foster care or adoption, only to be rejected or humiliated by the message that their family is not acceptable without true evaluation of their merits, this only serves to decrease our state's pool of loving homes. Private agencies, as contractors of the state, are often seen as one "system" and even the most sensitive rejection with accompanying referral to a non-discriminatory agency is confusing at best and alienating at worst. We cannot afford to narrow our pool of possible safe, loving homes for children by allowing contractors to reject families who may have provided stability and permanence to our children. Talk of the demise of adequate agency capacity, and the closure of religious based private agencies to serve Michigan's children if this bill is not enacted is nothing more than a "red herring" argument. Despite a long history of dedicated services to children and families, if these agencies choose not to provide state/federal funded child welfare programs if the bills do not pass -- any number or the over 100 private child placing agencies in Michigan would be poised to assume their duties.